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CRAWDADDY

ROBBIE ROBERTSON INTERVIEW
THE BAND'S MAN STEPS OUT OF DYLAN'S SHADOW

**KINKS
KONFESSIONS:
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REVEALED**

**DOMESTIC SPYING:
WE'VE GOT PROOF!**

**"LEGALIZE HEROIN!":
WM. BURROUGHS**

**A TRUCKER'S SAGA:
WEED, WHITES & WOMEN**





DAVID GAHR

ACROSS THE GREAT DIVIDE WITH ROBBIE ROBERTSON

A Portrait of the Artist as a Mystery Man

by Harvey Kubernik

Robbie Robertson had talked, and so when Bob Dylan returned a call to the *Crawdaddy* offices you couldn't be sure if Dylan were being gracious or cautious, or both. Robbie had agreed to "a discussion as opposed to an interview," and Dylan wanted to know if there was something specific to respond to.

"Well, Bob, we found that Robbie is very private, kind of secretive, somewhat mysterious . . ."

"Oh," Dylan said amiably, "that's not surprising. There's lots of people like that. . . ."

Shangri-La Studios sat unattended by the side of the road, looking like the farmhouse set of *Lassie*. As part of the Malibu/Zuma colony, whose inhabitants include Carole King, David Geffen, Ryan and Tatum O'Neal, Robert Plant, Neil Young and Bob Dylan, the building seemed trying hard not to attract attention. A truck rolled in carrying what could have been musicians or gardeners. "We don't want to live a life where we have guards at the gate," Robbie told me later. When

someone waved to a side entrance, the nonchalance seemed rigorous, my unfamiliar face an intrusion.

I entered through the kitchen, which had only recently been added onto the house and was unfinished—its sole contents a coffee maker and a refrigerator with only milk and cream in it. The hot water had not yet been turned on; the atmosphere was less than cordial.

Robbie Robertson strode in looking healthy and tanned—not swarthy like a native Angelino but nicely browned for an immigrant. "Let's do it out here," he said and began to move toward the out-of-doors.

"Can I see the lay-out?" I asked.

"Sure," he said, changing direction, and led the way through the ranch-style interior like a pioneer. We walked down a hallway, past a bar overwhelmed by a full-length mirror ("This used to be a whore house," Robbie laughed), and into a characterless living room dominated by a modern couch and chairs; crisp lines and taut upholstery bespoke the newness of the furniture and added to a pervasive

sense of impermanence. A dated *Billboard* was the only loose object in sight.

Next we entered the studio, whose control room seemed cramped like a small bedroom. The board was fully equipped, and when Robbie stepped away for a moment I moved toward the two engineers standing behind it. There was a strange moment as I approached; they seemed to simultaneously stand their ground and back away, as if they had been briefed to be no more than polite. Perhaps the understanding was unspoken, but there was a tangible guard drawn. I introduced myself, but they would not tell me their names. I attempted casual conversation.

"How does this studio compare with others in L.A.?" I wondered.

"Well," one deadpanned, "it's Shangri-La, obviously."

Behind the plate glass window, in the studio itself, Neil Diamond was tuning up. The recording area was larger than the control room but by no means spacious, and super-sanitary. There were no signs of tobacco, no ash trays, no inebriants of

any kind; antiseptic. It was ten in the morning—hardly the customary punch-in time for musicians—but work was due to begin shortly; Robertson is producing Diamond's latest album.

"Robbie and I met three years ago in Woodstock," Diamond said, "though we didn't get together intellectually or creatively until about a year ago. It's kind of an interesting project for both of us; a definite collaboration. We're working around a story, telling a tale musically about a certain period of time, using the events and music of that period. The time is just about the early '60s—The Beatles, Kennedy, some of the social stuff that was going down then—as seen through the eyes of the songwriter."

They seemed a strange pairing—Cracklin' Rosie meets Virgil Kane.

"Hirth's album probably had a lot to do with it," Robbie explained. [Last year, Robertson produced *Hirth from Earth* by singer/songwriter Hirth Martinez.] "Neil saw another side of me outside of what I do with The Band or Dylan. The challenge was interesting to me—off the wall—and something that would have never entered my mind."

The Diamond mine is so accessible, though. Does Neil really need a producer after all these years?

"Perhaps he does, perhaps he doesn't," Robbie offered. "I think he enjoys the help. I'm not coming in to help him play songs; I play a much bigger part. He just wants to make a real good album from his aspect. From my aspect, I'm trying to make a much more real album, one that matters all the way up and down the line. It's a departure from Neil's usual thing. Whether it's right or wrong remains to be seen."

Robbie and I walked back through the studio to the living room. A glass sliding door opened and we stepped out into the fresh air. The grounds were a lush green. Directly in front of us loomed trees and an expanse of neatly cropped lawn. To the right, a half-mile away, the ocean offered an endless vista. It was clear this winter morning, 76 degrees with a warm breeze blustering, and we could see that the lone surfer wasn't even wearing a wet suit.

There were none of the ritual Southern California Bar-B-Q clutterments; no children's toys, no musical instruments. Rather, the area was empty save a couple of red wooden recliners with mattress pads—poolside accoutrements.

I sat on one of the lounges; Robbie reclined. He smoked most of the time we spoke, occasionally clasp ing both hands behind his head or jack-knifing forward to press a particular point. He looked the seaside nature boy in a blue workshirt with the first couple of buttons undone, cuffs rolled up to the elbow revealing (yes, I looked) unmarked arms. He wore no watch, no jewelry at all. Sandals.

"There's a kind of elegance about him," said Artie Traum, singer-songwriter and Robertson acquaintance in Woodstock. "Young people in Montreal have a similar kind of demeanor. [Robertson is from Toronto but his wife is from Montreal.] He's obviously very intelligent. Very quiet. When he lived in Woodstock he didn't seem to have an active social life. He was one of those guys you hardly ever saw in the store or in the local bar."

"He is intense in a lot of ways," said Artie's brother, guitarist Happy Traum. "He's very protective of his privacy, and when he was here in Woodstock he was very reclusive."

Two years ago, bored with Woodstock,



... A quiet maniac?

Robbie picked up his family and moved three thousand miles west; his second dramatic migration. Why? "I always fantasized living on the ocean," he explained in his travel-worn accent, bred in Canada and shaped by nights on the Southern rock circuit and years in the Catskills. His phrasing is both relaxed and careful, words stretching out like the Pacific Ocean lying just over the cliff. "I visited friends by the water and it always moved me," he said. "I thought I'd try it for a while and I told the other guys in the band about it and they moved not long after. It just all fell into place. Then Bob [Dylan] came out and that's when we decided to do the tour last year."

"It's funny," said Artie Traum, "I could expound at length on the other guys in the band—especially Rick Danko, who's extremely funny and a maniac. Probably the most insight would be that there are five guys in the group—four of them are maniacs, very outspoken, ready to boogie in a second, partying and drinking and running around with women. . . . Robbie may be a maniac, but he's a very quiet one. He usually sits in a corner very quietly behind some tinted sunglasses and peers out at people."

Jaime Robert Robertson, 31, has made a career out of peering at people, mostly Americans, from uniquely private vantage

points, attempting as a displaced Canadian to ferret out and catalogue the panoramic truths in the American experience and synthesize them into picaresque songs depicting the strengths and foibles of all peoples; all pilgrims.

Robertson's home in Malibu is the latest in a series of outposts in his adopted country. From the "whispering pines" to the pounding surf, he and The Band have always held the United States and its components in narrative esteem. The group arrived here in the mid-'60s, a time when many native Americans were choosing self-imposed exile from their roots and realities. The Band, however, were five spiritually hungry young men who had left Canada, "The Land of Snow," committed to a respectful wandering. Their first album, *Music From Big Pink*, was simultaneously a celebration of and a rededication to the traditional values which many Americans were in various stages of discarding.

The themes of Robertson's best songs, from *Big Pink* to the much-matured *Northern Lights-Southern Cross* lp, are distinctly American vis-a-vis Canadian, but universal in their yearnings: elusive verities and unkept appointments ("To Kingdom Come"); diligence and anonymous integrity ("Rags & Bones," "Hobo Jungle"); loneliness and disjunction ("Acadian Driftwood"); the snares that accompany renewal ("King Harvest"); love's entanglements and numbing betrayals ("All La Glory," "The Rumor," "The Unfaithful Servant"); the consequences of moral bankruptcy and greed ("Stage Fright," "Daniel and the Sacred Harp") and the terrible responsibilities of living ("The Weight").

Through it all, Robertson has been meticulously romantic in his constructions, using words like "renegade" or "rounder," or phrases like "gypsy tailwind" to describe the restless bravery of his characters. "I like the use of those words, nostalgic words," he says. "That's kind of what The Band's music has been; that's kinda what it does to people. It brings home things they take for granted."

Back home, as teenagers in Canada, guitarist Robertson, along with bassist Rick Danko and keyboardists Garth Hudson and Richard Manuel, were inspired by the vibrant new music pouring into their lives from radio stations in the United States. The quartet pooled their creative enthusiasms into a succession of bands with names like The Robots, The Rocking Revols and Thumper and The Trombones. In time, they hooked up with an oddball Arkansas rockabilly crooner named Ronnie Hawkins and became The Hawks, Ronnie's back-up group. Dubbing himself "The King of Rockabilly," Hawkins, with four wide-eyed Canadian kids in tow, lumbered along a zigzagging circuit of ginmills and roadhouses. The drummer

of The Hawks was fun-loving Levon Helm, a boy from Marvel, Arkansas, whom Hawkins had borrowed from a band called The Jungle Bush Beaters and brought north with him in 1958. The whole bunch appeared on several of Hawkins' early records, among them his *Mojo Man* lp.

The traveling transformed the boys, especially Robbie. At the age of 16, Levon took him along on a side trip back into the South, where Robbie first glimpsed and then gulped down double helpings of a world he had only heard and read about back in Toronto. Most of all, he was moved by the music of each area he passed through—each style discrete, brimming with a nation's worth of confession, legend and falsehood, and all of them overlapping in a great quilt of information and emotion. There were Tex-Mex stomps and country swing, German and Swedish folk ballads, Acadian love songs and cajun two-steps, rock 'n roll and brassy jazz, bluegrass and lumberjacks' calls, sea shanties and rhythm & blues, David Seville & the Chipmunks and Bobby Darin, and much, much more.

After spending several years with Hawkins, the band cut out; Levon became their new leader. The group at first continued to play Ronnie's well-worn circuit of dives, but gradually widened their Toronto trajectory to include the East Coast of the U.S. Along the way, they changed their name from The Crackers to The Canadian Squires and then back to The Hawks (or rather, Levon Helm and The Hawks.) They also cut a number of obscure singles, such as "Leave Me Alone," "Go, Go Liza Jane" and the ominous "The Stones I Throw (Will Free All Men)," while building up a small reputation as a disciplined, adventuresome band.

In 1965, Levon and company met up with Bob Dylan, who hired them as his back-up for what was to be many months of savage, sinew-building roadtrips. Levon did not go along, however, embarrassed that *his* band was backing another. In 1967, he swallowed his pride and rejoined The Hawks in Woodstock.

The others had accompanied Dylan into the woods of upstate New York in search of an idyll, and there resolved to bow out of Dylan's secondary spotlight. In truth, the coalition had always been an awkward one; The Hawks were seasoned musicians back when Robert Zimmerman was still an errant scamp wondering how to run away from Minnesota. Moreover, their lifeline was somewhat at variance with that of the skinny balladeer.

The Hawks entered a little pink house in West Saugerties, N.Y., emerging in 1968 as The Band. *Music From Big Pink* surprised a lot of people expecting more disparagement set to music; the album was full of unabashed moralizing, culminating in the assertion that if we natives didn't

want America with all its dramas of goodness, malice and pain, they would be only too happy to take up the burden.

Big Pink was followed in 1969 by the like-minded *The Band*, the dark, brooding *Stage Fright*, and then *Cahoots*, a thoroughly directionless album. A live lp, *Rock of Ages* (1972) demonstrated that The Band's music was as vital as ever, but rumors of disenchantment, drugs and an impending break-up persisted when *Moon-dog Matinee*, a collection of oldies, was released in the fall of 1973. The Band resurfaced on Dylan's coarse *Planet Waves* and accompanied him on his 1974 tour, but though accorded equal billing, they played no songs less than four years old.



1969: "I have winter in my blood"

Then, another year-and-a-half passed before *Northern Lights-Southern Cross*, a competent effort that seems very much a tentative comeback for The Band—or is it? All of the songs were written by Robbie, who reportedly saved a lackadaisical group from dissolution by coaxing them into Shangri-La to cut his material.

If Robertson was The Band's saviour, it wouldn't be the first time he has offered help to aimless artists. "Unlike some musicians, he's always taken a keen interest in the progress of other musicians, including myself," Gordon Lightfoot declared. "He *always* offers encouragement."

"I'd say Robbie influenced me quite a lot in terms of ambition," recalled Jesse Winchester, who met Robertson in the late-'60s while practicing in the basement of an Ottawa church. Robertson helped Winchester cut a demo, introduced him to Albert Grossman, and then produced his first album. "It never occurred to me to do a record until Robbie came along and got hold of me to think *big*," Winchester admitted. "Don't make any mistake about it, he *does* think big. I was just waltzing through until he showed me what a career was like."

Sitting with Robbie on his windswept patio, I hoped he would be able to dispel the shadows surrounding The Band. What went wrong with one of the most critically-

acclaimed groups of the last decade and why has it taken them so long to get back on the track?

"We've been together fifteen years," Robbie recollected, "and it would be unnatural and forced all of a sudden if we were going to be rock symbols or rock stars. That's all meaningless to us. It's never been part of our style to chop off heads on stage for extra applause."

"We just make music. Whatever's in our mind. What happens to it is out of our control and sales don't influence us. I'm not concerned about the disco thing. That's fine, but it's not our job figuring out how to fit in the disco, AM or FM market. We put it on record, and for people who like it, it's available. I just want to get out the stuff that I can live with."

Virtually all the material that has come out of The Band in the past five years has been Robbie Robertson's "stuff." After a promising songwriting start, Richard Manuel and Rick Danko seem to have lost their muse. Neither contributed a single song to *Northern Light/Southern Cross*. Did they leave the sole songwriter's role to Robbie or did he seize it?

"It's no different than it's always been," Robbie shrugged. "It's just a particular time when one of the guys has more songs written than other times. It just fell that way this time and will probably change again. Rick did a song which we ended up taking off, only because it just fit in a little less, for some reason or other."

The explanation is evasive, an effective smokescreen set up around Band affairs. Robertson knows as well as anyone that things *are* different; three-and-a-half years is a considerable length of time to go without a brand-new lp, and there's never been an all-Robbie Band album before.

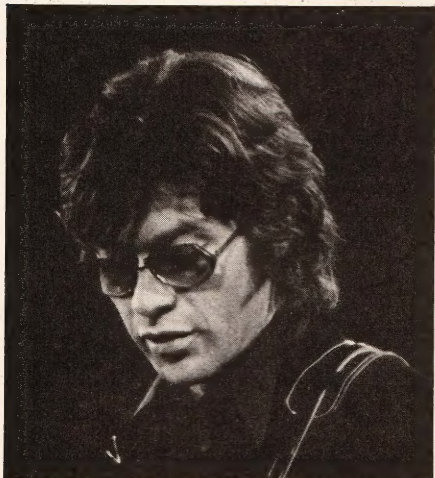
Robertson himself admits that success has tempered his prolificness. "Sometimes people get so lazy," he offered without mentioning any names, "that when you don't have to do something, you don't do it. A few years ago I *had* to do it—I had to come up with it—and now maybe I don't have to so much, so I don't push myself as hard. Sometimes I really don't feel like doing it; I feel like doing something else."

"Music doesn't play a 90% role in my life," he revealed. "I have many other distractions and that's only one thing I'm interested in. But it's still enjoyable and a pleasure."

Artie Traum said that it was his understanding (from talking with Rick Danko) that Robbie is "the kind of person who writes voraciously for like a couple of weeks and comes up with a whole bunch of tunes really fast. He just kind of says, 'All right, we've got to do an album, let's

go write.”

Robertson almost always writes in the third person, autobiography coming out in interpretive snips and snatches. “I just think it’s part of storytelling,” Robbie commented. “It isn’t anything to put the songs in the third person. Sometimes when you get that little detachment you can write about more. I’m Canadian and I wrote the song about the Civil War [“The Night They Drove Old Dixie Down”]. I didn’t know the story and it fascinated me. Everyone else took it for granted—they read about it in history class. When it’s strictly about yourself, you’re not allowed to deal with fiction. So it’s something that opens the gates a little bit.”



ROBERT SHAW

“When I was frustrated and I had to play . . .

However, Robbie admits that “Rags & Bones” is a recollection of his great grandfather. “My great grandfather came to this country, he was a scholar from Israel. When he got here all he studied was meaningless. He was capable of nothing but reading and intellectualizing. He became a rag man, not an unusual thing at the time. He had a horse and wagon and he would go up and down the lanes singing this song, ‘Rags, bones and old used clothes.’ It’s a chant that stuck in my head. The image. I never saw him doing it, but the legacy carried on. When I was a kid I would see the rag man and it was a very frightening symbol to me. The chant would never leave my mind.”

The tune is a cinematic treatment of street people and characters like the blind fiddler, the shoeshine boy, and the newspaper man. “Growing up in the city, that’s where people get their musical environment,” said Robertson, “and my musical background was hearing those musical situations in the street—the sound of the city. The sound turned me on to want to get involved with it. It’s a city song and a few of the songs on this album like ‘Forbidden Fruit’ and ‘Ring Your Bell’ are city songs. This album has a stronger city element than any other Band album before.”

“Acadian Driftwood” is not a city song; rather, its scope is transcontinental.

It is a story that’s had Robbie hooked for some time but didn’t come out until now. For the first time during our talk, he leaned forward in his chair and talked openly, at length, and with disarming passion.

“After the war between Montcalm and Wolfe [1759],” he explained, “there was a question whether Canada was going to belong to France or Britain. After Britain finally won, it was put to the people living there that they had to swear allegiance or give up their land. So some of them went to the old country, some of them went to the French Islands, the Caribbean, and some across the border down the Mississippi to Louisiana. This took place over some

**“DON’T
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SAID
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“ROBBIE
DOES THINK
BIG.”**

three years and what happened out of this was the birth of the Cajun population.

“I’ve always found it a fascinating story and anyone I’ve spoken to about it has said, ‘No kidding. I didn’t know that.’ It’s kind of an untold story. I was overwhelmed when I found out very few people knew where the Cajuns came from.”

A French lyricist in Canada helped Robbie with the closing stanza. Robertson translated for me, even though he complained that it would sound “stiff and weird” in English: “‘You know, Acade, I am sick inside for my home . . . The sun on the snow makes—or melts—into tears . . . I’m coming back, Acade. . . .’ This person is saying that I have winter in my blood.”

“Still, ‘Acadian Driftwood’ is part of my background. I had to come here [to Malibu],” Robertson points out, “to write the first song I’ve ever written from a Canadian aspect. It’s that detachment.”

He wrote “Jupiter Hollow” after reading the *Encyclopedia of Greek Mythology*. “It just came out, and I use images. When I started writing songs for the album, this was the thing on my mind. But it’s basically about someone losing their mind.”

The title of the album “just came from the air. Sitting down by the water at night, it just popped into my mind. Seemed fitting with the album, with the cover

picture.

“There’s horns on this new album, but it’s all Garth. It’s just more personal when you can do it all yourself. The only reason Byron [Berline] is on the album is that we wanted a special violin flavor [for “Acadian Driftwood”] and we didn’t want to take an incredible amount of time to get that. It’s a Band album, not Band-plus-101-Strings and a couple of horn sections and a bunch of arrangers. Whatever the music is, it’s what we do.”

On the new album, as on all previous, except for the live *Rock of Ages* lp, Robertson has submerged his sizzling lead guitar playing for a more economical rhythm role. Many Band fans wish he’d



ROBERT SHAW

. . . I kinda got it out of my system.”

step out a little more on record; it’s a demand created by respect bordering on reverence. “I’ll tell you,” says Bill Graham, who promoted the ’74 Dylan/Band tour, “he is among the two or three most *selfless* lead guitarists in the business. And the best, bar none, of any guitar player who plays with a singer, in unison with the vocals. If that sounds laudatory, that’s how I mean it to sound.”

Gordon Lightfoot, who’s known Robbie since the early-’60s in Canada (later, like The Band and Dylan, Lightfoot was managed by Albert Grossman) simply described Robertson’s guitar craft as “meticulous. . . . I like the way he works things out. Nothing’s left to chance. He takes his work very seriously.”

“On this last album I probably played more than any other time except for live lp’s,” Robertson explained. “The reason why I never wanted to play more on an album, and Garth also, was that there’s only so much you can get on an album. We’ve got basically 20 minutes a side. When I listen to albums and I hear a lot of instrumentals, a lot of playing and soloing on songs, it *bore*s me. So I’m more interested in the basic songs than the playing. The other thing is, we’ve been playing clubs six and seven nights a week. Then, when I was 16, 17, 18, when I was *frustrated* and I *had* to play a lot more, I kinda got it out of my system.

Ronnie Hawkins: "Robbie was my roadie!"



ART USHERSON

TORONTO—With wife Wanda by his side, Ronnie Hawkins leaned back on the couch, patted his ample belly and, in his inimitable Arkansas plowboy accent, told a roomful of Robbie Robertson stories. While his former pupil lounges in Malibu, Hawkins and his latest band of Hawks remain active on the bar circuit around Toronto, where Ronnie met Robbie some 16 years ago.

"We're overpriced and under-worked"—that's what Ricky Danko told me last month," Hawkins booms. "Me, I'm just the other way." As we spoke, Hawkins was getting ready to split for a week-long club date in Kalamazoo, Mich., where he would be joined by old Hawk-mate, Levon Helm. But Ronnie's best gig in recent memory remains his spot with Dylan's Rolling Thunder Revue in Toronto. "Did two numbers, got a bigger picture in the paper next day than he did," Hawkins boasts.

"And by the way," he adds with a grin of reminiscence, "did Robbie tell ya that he was my roadie when he started?" Back in 1959, "Robbie was about to go to jail, he was in a little trouble, and he came in on bass," gradually working his way up to lead guitar under the tutelage, first, of Fred Carter and then, Roy Buchanan. Ronnie had already brought Levon up from Arkansas with the original Hawks. "That's when I added Ricky Danko—he was working in a butcher shop in Simcoe—and Beak—the Gobbler, that's Richard Manuel—he was working in another band but when I needed a piano player, I hired him. And then Garth was the last one I brought in, around '61. He was the only one that was a schooled musician so I hired him as teacher; he taught 'em all how to read music."

At the age of 16, during his first year with the Hawks, Robertson recorded his first two original songs with the Hawks, "Hey Bobalu" and "Someone Like You." Hawkins claims that he had instructed the youngster that "there was more

money in songwriting and publishing than there is in playin'." Ronnie recalls a verse from J. R. Robertson's "Hey Bobalu" this way: *Hey Bobalu was her name/she don't love me but I love her just the same/treat me mean/treat me cruel/treat me just like I was a fool/I was a fool, Hey Bobalu.*

Robertson's quietly protective demeanor apparently started when he was "very young." Again, Hawkins takes some credit. "I try to teach all the guys that come with me that they're gonna have to take care of themselves one day. It's a dog-eat-dog world out there, I tell 'em, so don't say anything, 'cause it's better to remain silent and be thought dumb than to speak and remove all doubt. Set back and you're gonna learn some things. So now Robbie's gotten pretty smart in business. It's hard to fool Robbie."

The last time Ronnie rocked with Robbie was last fall, in Malibu. "I was out at his house, you know he bought it a couple years ago from that lady songwriter, what's her name, Carole King. Warren Beatty was coming for supper the night I was there. It certainly looked like Robbie was takin' care of business. He was doin' movie scores and songs and the phone was ringin'. He's become a white collar worker, a big boss. He's gonna end up bein' what we used to call down home a ty-coon."

Over the years, various persistent stories have formed a kind of modern folklore around The Band, and Hawkins indicates that The Rumors extended as far north as Canada. Concerning hard drug use: "I was out there and I didn't see them doin' anything," Hawkins declares. "They toke a little, you know, but I didn't see any syringes or pounds of coke or anything like that. Richard used to drink a lot but he can't do that anymore, I think his liver is a little messed up."

There were also those Richard-Manuel-is-dead reports. "I heard that and I called him up and said, 'Where do you want the flowers sent?' And Beak said: 'If they're poppies, you can send them right now.' He said he's never been healthier, and that's what Ricky Danko said too."

Like many others, Hawkins is dismayed about the lack of Band songs by anyone other than Robbie. "I played with Ricky and Levon in Arkansas just a little while ago, and Ricky had a bunch of songs he's written but he's kind of saving them. I think they're gonna have like separate albums: Ricky'll be doin' his album and Levon's doin' his album and maybe Beak'll end up doin' his album. I'm sure what's gonna happen is they're gonna play together once in a while but I think they're gonna go their separate directions, like a Crosby, Stills, Nash & Young kind of thing."

—Greg Mitchell

"Now I'm not looking to fill up our albums with a lot of guitar doodling. I mean, I love to hear good guitar playing and I love to play it, you know, but there's a decision to be made here. I could play more and Garth could play more but it would mean less songs. On this album there's only eight songs. There wasn't room for any more and we had to take one off at the last minute because they couldn't master the record well the way it was."

"All of our songs aren't that wordy and there are some that are more instrumental than what I really like to do. That's about as far as I like to take it. Beyond that I think it's filler."

The double keyboard combination of piano and organ is a Band trademark. Has Robbie ever felt suffocated by this format? "No. I play as much as I want to play. No one is telling me, 'Listen, you're playing too much.' That's my own decision. That's how much I prefer to do. When I hear other people play a lot more than required I find it really drivel and there's nothing in this fuckin' wide world that's going to do anything for the song; I don't care. I like a good guitar part where it adds something, has a nice place and is a nice solo. Not too much, not too little. But I think as time goes on it just takes different proportions, and too much is unnecessary."

Robertson's guitar theory seems to simply extend his basic life philosophy of unhurried discipline. Or, as Bob Dylan said when he called to talk about Robbie:

"Listen to his guitar playing. That's all you have to know about him."

Robbie doesn't like to be pumped about Bob Dylan. He refused to talk to Anthony Scaduto, author of the fine Dylan biography. But his association with Dylan goes back a long way and he did compile the authentic Columbia issue of the famed and much-bootlegged Basement Tapes. Why issue them now?

"It wasn't put out to combat anything," Robertson claimed. "All of a sudden it seemed like a good idea. I can't tell you why or anything. It just popped up one day. We thought we'd see what we had. I started going through the stuff and sorting it out, trying to make it stand up for a record that wasn't recorded professionally. I also tried to include some things that people haven't heard before, if possible. Whether it went top ten or not didn't concern me. I just wanted to document a period rather than let them rot away on the shelves somewhere. It was an unusual time which caused all those songs to be written and it was better it be put on disc some way than be lost in an attic."

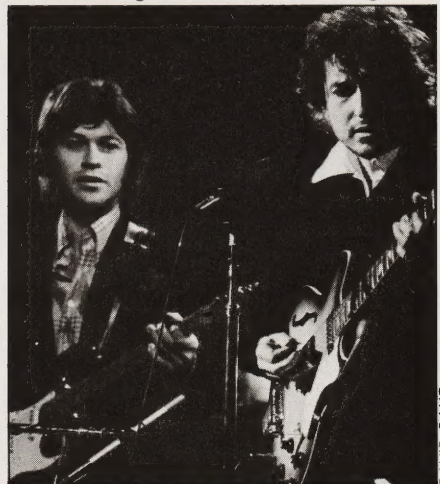
When The Band and Dylan toured together in 1966, Dylan's electricity was still an issue with diehard folkies. "Then the people came to the concerts with their minds made up. They booed but at least



HOWARD ROSENBERG

on the '74 tour we didn't get any bottles thrown at us," Robbie said, grinning, slowly breaking into an explanation of the roots of the '74 tour.

"I moved out to Malibu and Bob and I were hanging out," Robbie recalled. "We'd been talking about a tour for years. All of a sudden it seemed to really make sense. It was good idea, a kind of a step into the past. We felt if there's anything that everybody expects us to do that's what it is. We quickly decided it was a good idea and a new day. The other guys in the band came out and we went right to work. We started rehearsing anyway so we thought we'd do the *Planet Waves* album and get back to rehearsing, and



"A kind of step into the past . . ."

that's exactly what we did."

Planet Waves was completed in three days. Dylan may be a fast worker but for The Band, who take infinite pains, that's hectic. "We know the technique very well. We've been playing with Bob for years. There's no surprises involved. We did it and it was over before we knew it. We managed to get several things off very well for such a short time. But it went by so quick and we were preoccupied with the tour and all the other things that go with it. With all the decisions to be made and all the how, when and where, that album really took a back seat.

"At first we were going to do a few cities but as we went along we got stronger and more courage and it ended up pretty large," said Robbie. "The whole tour was a high but I don't enjoy touring that much. With all the time we've done on the road there's maybe three times that I actually enjoyed it and [the '74 tour] was one of the times. It was smooth and tasty and a lot of fun to do, and we got through it alive!"

Did Robbie feel that the group, which had finally established a distinct musical identity, was assuming a subordinate position by linking up with Dylan again?

"It just came natural and we did it," Robbie said. "It was done very nicely, very professionally, with nice ads." Robbie is not a descriptive commentator. "The

way we did the shows was the way we wanted to do the shows. When we played, Bob had a little rest and when he did his acoustic thing we had a rest. We enjoyed playing with him; there was no ego consciousness at all. This was a Dylan/Band tour. We got accepted very well. Ten years ago we were just some musicians working with Bob Dylan, but this time we were more than a backing band."

Bill Graham, who promoted the gigs, agreed. "During that tour," Graham enthused, "I was pleased not that they played well—they always play well—but with the extent to which the audience liked them. I wouldn't say they were popular; a diamond is a gorgeous thing to

"I HAD TO COME TO MALIBU TO WRITE THE FIRST SONG I'VE EVER WRITTEN FROM A CANADIAN ASPECT."

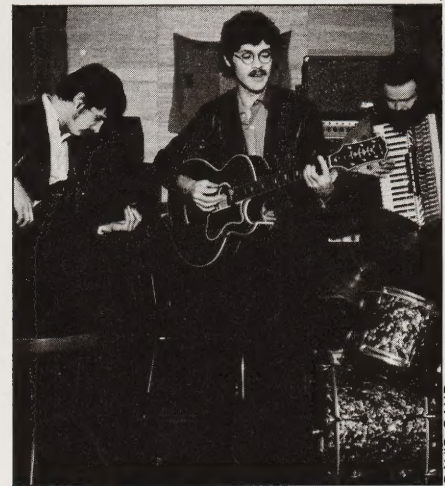
look at and have around, but you don't call it popular. I like people who like The Band and I was pleased with their reception because it meant that there were people in America who like good music!"

The Band also played some festival sites in the summer of '74, not Robbie's favorite venues. A live Watkins Glen lp, he said, "would make a great comedy album. . . . I'll tell you something. It doesn't matter if there's 30 or 300,000—once you get in front of people you have to do something. The festivals are for people to get together. Who's playing is secondary. Anytime we've done those things we've never really felt natural about doing it. We played the large dates because some terrific people were involved or we admired the other acts and they asked us to. We're a puppet show in the distance, and the music is an excuse. But playing at a place where you can actually see and hear, that's a different ball game for the audience. They're checking it out and a real evaluation takes place."

During this period The Band had been developing what Robertson terms a "works" album. "We were working on a musical experiment and got very involved with it, and we're still involved with it," he said. "It's a great departure, something we've been trying to do but not on a level of songs. It's equivalent to writing a sym-

phony and it's not a thing that you whip together in the afternoon. We still work on it and keep moving ahead and it's particularly interesting for Garth, who probably is the foremost musicologist in popular music. It's a thing that you can't do part time. You have to really do it; you can't write a symphony between picnics. We're doing lots of other things so it takes a second place because it's so long to do."

The major influence on the "works" album was Polish avant-garde classical composer, Krzysztos Penderecki, author of *The Entombment* and *Victims Of Hiroshima*, who is "like the Ingmar Bergman of music," Robbie told Robert Hil-



"This time we were more than a backing band"

burn of the *Los Angeles Times*, "and that's where I'm at. I totally relate to these two people. His influence on the new album ["works"] may be totally unrecognizable, but he's what I've listened to to get where I am." The "works" album, Robertson said, is about 60% finished. "It's a complicated and sophisticated move; it's not just a bunch of songs."

An album that certainly was just a bunch of songs is the much maligned and misunderstood *Moondog Matinee*. The name was taken from Alan Freed's old radio show and the record is an excursion into The Band's colorful past. "When you played clubs, people didn't want to hear the songs you wrote," he said. "We always strongly objected to the hit parade. We thought of ourselves as beyond the things that were hits at the time. 'I'm Ready' is total juke-box music. 'The Great Pretender' is one of the greatest songs of that era. 'Saved' is a Leiber/Stoller song that really wasn't that popular and few people heard it, while 'Change Is Gonna Come' has a great vocal by Rick. What a sad song," he mused. "We wanted to include a Buddy Holly tune but the ones we wanted to do had been covered so many times."

The failure of the album worries Robbie. He reached for another Marlboro and a whole cigarette went by as he de-

Hirth Martinez: "I thought Robbie was a spaceman"



BRAD ELTERMAN

LOS ANGELES—There ought to be a sign above the front door of Hirth Martinez's small cottage in the Hollywood hills that reads: ROBBIE ROBERTSON WAS HERE. Perhaps if there was, visitors would be more compassionate when exposed to Hirth's slightly addled deportment of late.

"It's amazing," he muses in a cautious, nasal tone. "I, I know it sounds strange after spending so much time with Robbie over the last two years, but, well, to me he's still a mystery man. For instance, it seems to me that if I asked him *anything*, he'd know the answer, just like a wise man. But he's so young, it really throws you off. . . ."

Poor Hirth is another confused but grateful victim of R. Robertsonism. A short time ago he was a total unknown, writing and playing hundreds of songs into a cheap Sony tape recorder on the round table in his cramped, cluttered living room, barely supporting his wife and young daughter with gigs as a guitarist with a band at the Beverly Hills Hilton. But with the release last winter of his *Hirth From Earth* debut album, Martinez became a member of a tiny, exclusive coterie of artists produced by Robbie Robertson, and an object of curiosity to the many in and out of the music industry who remain mystified by the arcane *modus operandi* of The Band's lead guitarist/songsmith. Hirth doesn't know why Robertson chose to produce his first lp, or why Robbie also intends to oversee his second album this spring. He's plenty happy about it, sure—actually, *stunned* might be a better word—but it's the *why* of it that's foiling a true enjoyment of the auspicious compliment.

"Robbie, see, he never says why about *anything*," Martinez explains. "I mean he shouldn't have to if he doesn't want to, but . . . well, I know his favorite filmmakers are Ingmar Bergman and Francois Truffaut, and his favorite composer is Krzysztof Penderecki, but he just says, 'I like them.' He *never* says why . . ."

"When we got together to choose songs for my album, he never gave a reason why one song should be used and another shouldn't. We went through about 300 tape songs at my house over the course of a year or so and he'd just say, 'We'll use this one.' Period. I wasn't even aware he intended to produce the album himself until he mentioned it one day."

Martinez has a rags-to-patches tale to tell, but he doesn't quite know where to begin. Part of the problem is he can't decide whether his story is a Brautiganesque human interest blurb, some convoluted Frank Capra melodrama, or a sci-fi who-dun-it with the last two pages torn out.

"Let's see," he begins bravely. "I met Robbie through a friend named Norman Harrison who sells and repairs guitars out of a shop in the San Fernando Valley. Robbie and Bob Dylan are customers of his. Bob Dylan was over at Norman's house one Friday morning in the summer of 1973 and Norman played Bob some of my tapes and he dug them. That same day, right after Bob left, Norman had to go over to Robbie's house to deliver some guitars and I went along. Norman brought the tapes Bob liked and—it was embarrassing—he told Robbie, 'I'm gonna play these songs for you *before* I get to selling these guitars.' It could have been disastrous, but Robbie listened graciously and said he wanted to hear more." Hirth was only too happy to oblige and soon found he had a "very businesslike" caller at his house from 10 a.m. to 5:30 p.m. every day for weeks at a stretch, poring over his stacks of tapes and cryptically separating the hits from the chaff.

"As Robbie and I were beginning work on the album, an L.A. musician friend of mine called me up to say hello and ask how I was doing," Martinez recalls. "I told him I was working on an album and he asked who else was involved. I said, 'Robbie Robertson is going to produce it.' My friend was real surprised and he said, 'Did Robbie ask you?' I told him yes and then he said, 'Do you realize what you've done?! Robbie Robertson must be the most conceited person in the business!'"

"I was shocked," Hirth confesses, "but since then I've heard other people, other musicians, saying similar things: that Robbie is cold and unfriendly and that he's a snob—'Snobby Robbie' I've heard some call him. I can understand how people might take him that way, since he's quiet and not outgoing or

talkative. Their feelings seem to be a mixture of a misunderstanding or mistrust of his mysteriousness, and regret—or whatever—that they cannot get close to him. It may be envy too, I think."

Reticence and reputation aren't the only aspects of the Robertson reality/image that Hirth finds perplexing. In fact, one facet of Robbie has him downright spooked.

"What I'm going to tell you may sound weird," Martinez warns, "but it's true. I live in this little house and the roof is falling in; the walls warp and peel when it rains, so when I go to Robbie's place it's like a paradise and I feel funny about mentioning bread. Once my car was broken and I knew I wouldn't be able to make it to the studio the next day; I was thinking in my head, 'I'm gonna ask him RIGHT NOW about money,' and then he brought it up! Things like that happen *constantly*. Many times I'll be at home getting all worked up about something I have to ask Robbie about and then the phone rings and it's Robbie! He says, 'Listen, I was just thinking . . . ' and it's just what I was worried about!'"

At one point, Hirth had a theory about Robbie's knowing ways.

"I'm interested in flying saucers," says Hirth, "and Robbie is too. Robbie has told me about a time he saw something in the sky he couldn't identify; it may have been in Woodstock, I don't remember, but I think it was a flash, a glowing object in the sky. Anyhow, I was reading where UFO researchers were saying there's a lot of sightings and UFO activity in Canada, where Robbie's from. I know this sounds silly," he laughs, "but I began to wonder if Robbie himself was a spaceman and that was the reason he could guess my thoughts and was intelligent and skillful beyond his years. I finally asked him outright and he just busted out laughing."

All this thinking out loud about Robertson doesn't bring Martinez any closer to an ascertainment of his benefactor's master plan, however.

"I still can't figure it out," he reveals. "Robbie's lawyers and people around him always would ask me why he was helping me out. They'd say things to me like, 'We don't know why Robbie is doing this, but he wants us to send you this check, or set this up for you, or handle this. . . . ' They used to tell me that what Robbie was doing with me could really hurt his career if it didn't work out."

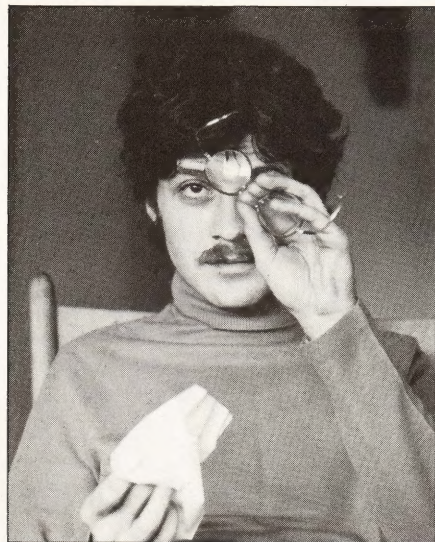
"I'll say one thing," he asserts. "Robbie got me a contract with Warner Brothers that was probably the best contract I could possibly get, from publishing on down. Robbie handled it all—he even thought up the name for my publishing company. He named it 'Mystery Hill Music.'"

—Timothy White

fended the album. "We did *Moondog Matinee* for ourselves. We were in the mood and it was our own personal shot at nostalgia—what we usually do for everybody else. Beyond that, we had no control whether anyone liked it or not. We didn't compete with the originals. We were expanding and complementing them."

"Mystery Train" had some additional lyrics added by Robbie, who had to secure the OK from Sam Philips. "He loved it and that made me feel good."

"People wanted a new album of Band songs. Fine, we're gonna do that, but at the time this was natural and *not* an



DAVID GAHR

"It's never the same old story"

excuse. We did these songs in clubs and our claim at the time was that we played them really well. It wasn't a reminder of how good the records actually were. I felt on most of the tunes we pulled it off and that's hard to do.

"It would have been much easier to make another Band album," he continued. "Here you have to compete with yourself, the old songs and these artists. I didn't realize at the time how involved it was. Unfortunately, rather than taking it for what it always was, people had to compare it to something else we've done."

"It's the only album that I've ever heard of old rock and roll where I thought the songs came anywhere near complementing the originals or else being in the same ball park. The album was an exercise in our own past and we really enjoyed doing it," he concluded, putting out the smoke.

Robbie spoke warmly and almost with awe of Hirth Martinez, whose *Hirth From Earth* album he produced last year. "Bob Dylan told me this guy was really extraordinary and that I should check him out," he said. "When I met Hirth I totally related to him and I listened to some of his songs and tried to think of someone who could produce his album. This went on and on and eventually I said 'fuck it, why don't we just go in and cut the album?'"

Hirth had hundreds of songs in boxes in

his Hollywood Hills apartment. His music fused melodies with eccentric chord changes and mixed time signatures as he sang of UFOs as well as loneliness and self-doubt. "To me he was the new King Pleasure. His influences were much wider than mine," said Robertson. "Lambert, Hendricks & Ross and a whole lot of other people. He's a much more accomplished writer than I am. He writes about certain things that I try but fail to pull off." The Hirth excursion allowed Robbie a chance to work with horns, strings, ARP and moog, instruments which rarely appear on Band waxings.

"I NEVER WORRY ABOUT THE GROUP BECOMING A PARODY."

"Hirth reminds me of a musical Dante," Robbie insisted, "the way he describes women and things. UFO's. It's cosmic. Anybody else who writes about it just makes me vomit. He takes in heaven and hell."

The fact that the album failed commercially doesn't particularly bother Robbie. "Jesse Winchester's album was a total flop and that's still one of the finest albums I've ever heard. The drivel that I read about Hirth made me realize that people missed the point. He's a great songwriter and people will cover his songs," he predicted. "Believe me, I don't go around overrating people."

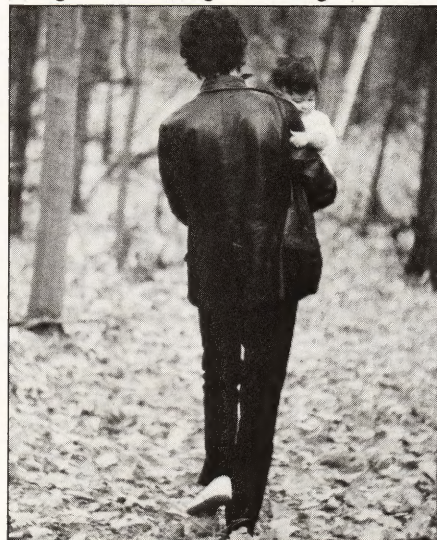
And The Band's failure at becoming chart-toppers? "Thinking about hits is a waste of time. As regards to The Band, I'd hate to feel that it's preconceived on any level. I think it would be damaging if we sat around and said, 'We've got to get something good for the kids.' Sales don't influence us. I never worry about the group becoming a parody. As long as we play really good, that's what really counts."

"I saw the Wailers at the Roxy. They were fine—really interesting—and Bob Marley is a great performer. I like all kinds of music but it's the song rather than the individual artists. I like the Wailers; other than that I can only take it by the song."

"From my standpoint," Robertson said, squinting out from behind the tinted shades, "there's so much to be done." On the agenda is a film with unreleased footage from Big Pink, the Woodstock Festival and the famous Full-Tilt train ride across Canada. "We're doing that right now and it may end up as a special for NET [Public Television]." The group will

resume live action with some concerts in the spring. "Performing has always been a chore for me. I've found touring a very weary and heavy experience every time. But I think we'll do another album [this Spring] and some live dates. I just feel by then we'll be anxious to do it." (A recent automobile accident involving Richard Manuel, however, may have postponed these plans.)

"There's never a conflict between my Band role and my projects," he added. "It's not that kind of relationship anyway. We've watched each other grow up and go from teenage kids to grown men."



DAVID GAHR

"There's so much to be done"

There's been obvious changes and responsibilities. But it's *never* in control, and it will never be in control, I hope, because it would make things very boring and it changes all the time. That's what enables us to work together, because it's never the same old story. We're five individuals who make music together. That's the way we've always seen ourselves."

He paused, ready to rise off his Malibu lounge chair. "There are so many things that I want to do. I have a list of things I really plan on getting to, sooner or later, and I'd like to do 'em all. I'm just carrying on without killing myself."

We shook hands—he is, as nearly everyone close to him has confided, "a gentleman"—and he headed back for his Shangri-La as I stepped to my car, knowing that I'd been permitted one of the first glimpses into the head and heart of The Band; but that look had been filtered through a smoked-lens looking glass.

"He says things in a very vague way," Happy Traum later affirmed regarding Robertson. "He'll say something and you'll be listening to it and it will make sense but when he's through you're not quite sure what it was that he said."

"It sounds great, but what did he say?"

With Jim Trombetta in Los Angeles and Peter Knobler, John Swenson, Greg Mitchell and Tim White in New York.